

# AN INTERIM PRINCIPAL'S PROCEDURE DURING A HYPOTHETICAL LEVEL III CRISIS

By

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*Date Received: 13/01/2018*

*Date Revised: 17/03/2018*

*Date Accepted: 15/04/2018*

## ABSTRACT

*This study assesses the cultural, social, and ethical issues that an interim principal would need to face following a Level III Crisis in a U.S. middle school building. This level crisis is the most serious, as a previous administrator has passed-away suddenly causing disruption to the school district's daily and long-term objectives. The replacement principal must not only keep the mandated testing on schedule for the students, but also ensure the following in order to continue the path for testing: (a) establishing District and School Crisis Teams, (b) releasing an informational letter to the parents, (c) issuing a statement to the media, and (d) designing a new scholarship in the deceased principal's name for this achievement test. This study found that accurate school leadership depends on holistic behaviorism and not individual behaviors. This includes administrators being well-versed in the mission and objectives of the district. Objectives included sharing the district's vision and plan while encouraging others to move forward (Kouzes and Posner, 2007).*

*Keywords: Educational Administration, School Collaborative Support, School Crisis Teams.*

## INTRODUCTION

"Ignorance [was] a vacuum that gossip quickly fill[ed]" (Gilbert, 2010, p. 3). In a time of crisis in a local U.S. Title I middle school, the unanticipated death of a prominent principal could spark potential chaos without proper procedural and ethical actions. As replacement principal with only a week to the school's preeminent achievement test, one must consider the cultural, social, and ethical issues encountered during the school's time of grieving without omitting important, pending test objectives. This scenario was defined as a Level III Crisis, as it combined a serious disruption of the daily school operation, while potentially risking the safety of staff, faculty, and students. Support from community members and parents was needed greatly during this time of anxiety and sadness (Trump, 2011).

The interim principal's agenda incorporated subsequently, (a) establishing District and School Crisis Teams, (b) releasing an informational letter to the parents, (c) issuing a statement to the media, and (d) designing a new scholarship in the deceased principal's name for this

achievement test (as impetus for both school unity and students' testing incentive). This included pre-testing days before the exam. Contingent upon a very short amount of time, this scholarship was only the first step in honoring this influential and well-liked member of the community.

## 1. Cultural Issues

The new principalship appointment began on a Monday, with the achievement test the following Monday. Cultural issues were apparent when many community members did not approve of the superintendent moving laterally a principal into this position, without the consideration of interviewing outside applicants. Incidentally, if the new principal did not understand the diverse needs and cultural dynamics of the school, its mission, purpose, or direction, it would be a monumental hindrance to the cultural welfare of the school, as schools either flourished or failed by inconsistent "inside" or "outside" hiring (Johannesen et al., 2008). However, for this time frame, the new principal served as interim until the hiring process commenced at the end of the school year, wherein she re-applied for the position. Her tenure serving as principal in another building

aided her knowledge of the district's culture and potential obstacles.

On Sunday before the appointment began, calls via the faculty and staff phone tree alerted respondents to an early meeting on Monday morning prior to the students' arrival. The agenda included, (a) a statement regarding the principal's death, (b) a brief statement of the interim principal's background, (c) the teachers' agenda for the day and week, and (d) information for a follow-up meeting at the end of the day. This meeting informed faculty and staff what to disseminate to students, how to handle their grief, and handle phone calls (or visits) from parents; this included inquiries within the community. Sharing the school's direction and mission concerning this event eased some angst by establishing clear agendas; gossip, and misinformation subsided thereafter.

## 2. Social Issues

Socially, when learning of the tragic circumstance this district faced, an ad hoc committee attempted to influence the interim principal's new agenda. This was based on a combination of the stakeholders' interests, the exigency of a crisis situation, and too-often scarce and incompatible resources, while leading to conflict. If a potential conflict was solved with datum and reason, the principal asked herself three questions: who were these stakeholders; what were their interests; and how much power did they have? (Bolman and Deal, 2010).

This ad hoc group wanted to conduct an immediate vigil in honor of the deceased principal and approached the interim's office with the details. She allowed it to occur, but not at the beginning of the week, as it was originally suggested. It was moved to the end of week, i.e., Thursday afternoon before Monday's test. The new principal gained more time to construct the rest of the weekly agenda without upsetting the students and parents in this group. Also, it was a good venue to announce the upcoming scholarship incentives during the test. Even though students and parents were adamant having a memorial the following day, the principal stressed that a couple more days of preparation allowed for not only better planning and advertising, but more community involvement. Interacting responsibly, as demonstrated in the anterior

paradigm, showed order to students, and parents during this stressful situation; it was a commitment of care between the parties leading into ethical considerations. It employed that all parties were treated with justice, trust, and respect (Johannesen et al., 2008).

## 3. Ethical Issues

The principal's ethical concern comprised the avoidance of intentional ambiguity of language within information dissemination. Ambiguity of language was defined as wording that was perceived in two or more different ways. The hesitation to give negative news or misaligned procedural feedback would overpower the new principal if she were not prepared. Failure to be honest would only compound a crisis; no stakeholder should think that a school leader was trying intentionally to encrypt information during a time of crisis (Johannesen et al., 2008; Ulmer et al., 2011).

Despite the need for honesty in disclosing information, in order to debunk rumors and misinformation, there must be an adherence to confidentiality. There must be some privacy in disclosing events, especially if the cause of death was inconclusive, centering around numerous theories of medical ailments, homicide, or suicide (George, 2009; Johannesen et al., 2008; Ulmer et al., 2011).

Hence, information should not be released to these middle school students in overtly graphic detail. Students aged 11-13 viewed death as realistic, while wanting to know why this death occurred biologically, and how it would change their daily routine. Therefore, the principal provided teachers with tools to keep their answers simple and consistent. Daily routines must also remain orderly, helping students develop a sense of closure. Some children grieved by asking questions repeatedly. Each question should be answered accordingly regardless of the repetition. Younger students retracted from their feelings displaying a flippant attitude. This was seen, mostly but not exclusively, in children aged 8-10. That was their defense mechanism (Burns, 2010; Johannesen et al., 2008; Murray, 2006).

## 4. Crisis Teams Implementation

After the early morning faculty meeting concluded, the principal established a School Crisis Team with members of the Guidance Department and other faculty members. A

District Crisis Team of administrations and staff was also constructed. Each team delineated objectives and goals for both groups that were realistic and obtainable in segmental steps. The best references for them to use were the State Education Department's website and the crisis-management policies of other local schools. Members of the School Crisis Team included the new principal, Assistant Principal or Dean of Students, counselors, social workers, teachers, a parent representative, and a student representative. District-level Team members included a School Board member, the Superintendent of Schools, Security Director, Transportation Director, Food Services Director, counselors and support staff, and the school attorney (Philpott and Serluco, 2010; Trump, 2011).

The two teams asked the following questions: did we have enough resources, counselors, and psychologists available? If not, how do we obtain them from another district or community agency in a timely manner? What are our communication capabilities? (status of two-way radios and phone lines) If not, what are the alternative communication between the crisis teams, the administration, and the rest of the faculty, and students? Many collegiate campuses began texting emergency messages en masse to all faculty and students in the event of a crisis. Even though most K-12 districts did not permit students to use their cell phones during the day, a communication was sent to faculty and support staff. Importantly, information was not disseminated only through a hierarchy, but also included the input of counselors and team members (Philpott and Serluco, 2010; Trump, 2011). The Crisis Teams were trained in crisis-protocol for both children and adults, while connecting reactions to trauma and bereavement. The Building Crisis Team implemented a support room, understood the elements of upcoming memorialization of the late principal, and had staff members available for classroom, support room intervention and escorting of students (Burns, 2010).

An erroneous response, in an example, occurred when a principal allowed students to wander aimlessly in the halls after the death of a student. With neither structure nor enforcement of their classroom presence, students abused their need of the Guidance Department's support room (grieving center), and became truant from school

property. The inexperienced principal, in his poor-judgment was very lucky that no student was injured off-school property. That scenario would never occur in this current case of the interim principal. A subsequent remedy included staff members escorting students who truly needed the support-room and counselor services. Staff members maintained order in the hallways, while diminishing potential truancy. The staff members observed how students and faculty adjusted behaviorally during the crisis, providing posterior counseling services (Burns, 2010).

Despite available, ample services for students during crisis, faculty members do not receive much-needed counseling services. Having a closer working relationship to the late principal than any other stakeholder in the district, faculty felt the loss on a greater scale. There were several interesting reasons why faculty did not obtain counseling services in times of dishevelment. Importantly, they were so involved in aiding students, and adhering to their own timeline throughout the day, they did not exhibit outward signs that intervention was needed. Crisis counselors did not focus on non-students if distress signs were not overtly displayed (Jaksec, 2007).

Teachers sacrificed frequently their own mental well-being, in order to help selflessly their students, and maintain order within the classroom. Their commitment to students' safety and health surpassed any reason to seek counseling. Finally, other staff members who were not teachers (i.e., office personnel, cafeteria workers, transportation workers) did not feel that crisis services pertained to them because they were not a part of the faculty unit (Jaksec, 2007).

The interim principal ensured that the Building Level Crisis Team implemented the following procedures to remedy the aforementioned. There must be repeated communication to the faculty and staff members that crisis support services were available. This was accomplished through e-mails and verbal announcements. A counselor corresponded with teachers periodically offering support, and told them where the counselor was located throughout that day. Crisis support was available, but never coerced, for the faculty member (Jaksec, 2007).

The new principal circulated around the building, surveying which teachers needed support services. If a teacher

exemplified signs of “work stoppage” or overt distress, the principal “covered” the class until a substitute could arrive, while offering relief to those who showed signs of emotional and physical fatigue. Faculty and staff were not forgotten; the principal helped them work collaboratively. It was the school leader’s responsibility to face each crisis, be vigilant, maintain focus on priority, and assess and respond accordingly (Leading through a Crisis, 2009; Managing Crisis, 2008).

#### **4.1 Parental Letter**

During a crisis, all parents want one thing: their children returned to their custody promptly and safely (Kerr, 2009). A letter home connected this purposeful information dissemination and description to conceivable stress reaction without the panic of parents coming to the school to pick-up their children. The principal constructed a parent meeting on Tuesday after the letter went home with the students on Monday afternoon (see appendix). The principal ensured that no media representation was present. A media statement will follow on the next day.

The segments of the parental letter began by a thoughtful composition to inform the parents of the death of the principal, how to look for signs of students’ distress, and to give the date and time of the informational meeting. Some signs that parents should look for in their children during a sudden loss were displayed in the following fashion: separation anxiety, sensitivity to daily routine changes, increased anger and aggression, isolation, suicidal thoughts, and changes in sleep and eating patterns (Kerr, 2009).

The next paragraph would be used if there were a risk of suicide contagion. The letter asked parents to monitor children more closely so they do not have access to weapons, alcohol, or drugs. Young people would not think clearly, while acting from emotions, if under the influence of controlled or illegal substances (Kerr, 2009).

The following paragraph in this letter identified the counselors and how they can be located. The after-hour contact person was named. This contact person was available for parents who cannot call during the school operating hours. Succeeding information included that written permission was needed for students wanting to

attend the funeral services. Finally, it was important to note that parents should move from awareness to activism. Specifically, parental help was needed recognizing the signs of distress in their children, and also staying in contact with the administration and school district. Also, the letter was posted online on the school’s website. There was also a very short “ticker” message on the local news with only the date, time, and location of the emergency meeting. Parents constituted as awareness for the public perception of the school and the principal. Their insight and their aid were deemed invaluable (Schneider and Hollenczer, 2006).

#### **4.2 Media Statement**

Communication was vital during a crisis and the media representatives surfaced very quickly, especially since almost every student now has a cell phone and could contact outside sources in swiftness. If the media did not reach the central office of the superintendent, or a Crisis Team spokesman, then they asked the interim principal for a statement. In a crisis, most often, administration was not prepared to talk to the press. This can threaten the integrity and plausibility of a much-needed connection to the community. The new principal did not speak to the press at the beginning of the day, in order to compose her thoughts before issuing a statement. A more prudent approach was telling the media when she would issue a statement, without vocalizing “no comment”. Being responsive to bad news included timeliness, but not done in haste (Philpott and Serluco, 2010; Schneider and Hollenczer, 2006).

When speaking to the media, the principal should be honest, but not overly-emotional and indecisive. Crying and getting angry at reporters does not accomplish a good rapport with them, while destroying credibility. A criterion included being brief, but concise while keeping the main points of the statement in mind. If information were not known, a candid respond would be, “I am not sure, I will look into it and get back to you”. At the end of the meeting, the school leader should be clear that the meeting has ended, and a follow-up of information will occur on a designated date and time. The principal directed the conversation’s path (not conversely). If there were legal issues preventing full disclosure, then the principal needed to be forthright by stating, “The

investigation continues; however, this is what I may disclose, and this is how we have helped the faculty, students, and parents today” (George, 2009; Philpott and Serluco, 2010; Ulmer et al., 2011).

### **4.3 Scholarship and Pre-testing Enactment**

With less than a week before an important achievement test, the principal and members of the Crisis Teams aided in composing and implementing a scholarship in the late principal's name. In order to get all tenets of this scholarship completed in a short amount of time, the new principal had an organized plan for its construction, as well as motivating students to continue with the test on the following Monday. Within a fragmented week, and many students and faculty leaving to attend the funeral service, or parents keeping their children out of school for those days, encouragement to move forward with the regular testing time and date ensued (Kouzes and Posner, 2007).

Members of the Crisis Teams contacted key stakeholders asking for a donation for this scholarship fund. They included the teachers' Union President, the head of the Parent-Teacher Organization, and key business owners within the community. Outside funding was needed for this scholarship. This scholarship promoted different prizes based-on various levels of achievement. For example, students with the highest scores received a monetary award toward college. Subsequent competitors received popular restaurant coupons and plaque recognition in the school. There were also ancillary categories of achievement such as “most improved” from the previous year (Darling-Hammond and Friedlaender, 2008).

Although contemporary research claimed that the basis of motivation should be derived solely from intrinsic needs (i.e., students' internal stimuli to create self-motivation), external factors of a reward-based motivational system, as impetus of volition, had a significant contribution within this particular circumstance. Largely contingent upon limited time before the exam, the principal implemented a reward-based blueprint for this test, while accomplishing the following (a) keeping a common-vested interest throughout the holistic student body, (b) serving the end goal as positive external regulation (i.e., good test results, parents' praise, school's recognition, etc.), and (c)

promoting external rewards as intrinsic motivation, as students acted within identified regulation, i.e., students viewed their own behavior as motivation to act accordingly (Frey and Osterloh, 2010; Ryan and Deci, 2002; Schunk et al., 2008; Vallerand and Ratelle, 2002).

When students had a common theme and goal, rewards for their hard work, motivated them to accomplish the pre-testing and testing tasks. Acknowledging the late principal helped achieve that goal. The students shared a commonality based upon a positive objective. Stability within the academic environment was based on clear expectations that the teachers and administration had for these test results, as well as instilling a necessity to inspire others to be motivated in taking this exam (Kantabutra, 2010).

The rewards for this scholarship are derived from community events and sponsored members who continued to donate in the future. This investment was small, as students patron their local facilities. Additionally, when the end-goal of the scholarship stressed the future-orientation of the school's vision (i.e., renewed commitment to community support and parental interaction), it exemplified guiding factors to which the school district related. Students' positive external regulation was not directly linked to autonomy (specifically defined as: students viewed themselves as the source of their motivation, incongruent to independence); however, most students at the middle school age would not willingly write an exam without some influencing, external factors. Ergo, the principal and various funding stakeholders continued gifting prizes as motivational factors of volition (Kantabutra, 2010; Ryan and Deci, 2002; Schunk et al., 2008).

External rewards for taking the exam, and being extrinsically motivated to do well, led to students' internationalization of intrinsic motivation. Identified regulation was described when a student internalized motivation, even while valuing their behavior as important. If students viewed the writing of the exam as important, then they strived to do well (Kantabutra, 2010; Ryan and Deci, 2002; Schunk et al., 2008).

The principal implemented pre-testing on the last two days of the week Thursday and Friday (permitting the vigil

service). Ideally, the curricula should have aligned to the main components of the exam, but if that did not occur, then an introduction to these testing segments would be judicious. Accelerating teachers' workloads to improve test scores was counterfactual; the principal stressed that only the main components of the test should be taught (Turley, 2006). These abridged pre-tests were an overview on which the students expounded. The goal was neither to test them ad nauseam nor divert instructional classroom time away from assessment time. Every assessment task should be broken-down into components. Students creating pre-test questions and peer-review of answers were two applicable methods (Turley, 2006).

## Conclusion

During a Level III Crisis, accurate leadership was not contingent upon one's temporal personality, but rather holistic behaviorism in the school district. Knowing how to maintain the school's direction and mission, while being consistent to all stakeholders were fundamental elements of viable leadership. However, sharing a vision of commonality between those who were grieving assented to the school leader's greatest challenge: encouraging others to move forward, while maintaining genuine sympathy (Kouzes and Posner, 2007).

Small victories rebuilt the school community disarrayed by the death of an esteemed administrator. Trust within collaboration took time to cultivate; however, it was vital to the balance of a school community. Trust was built also by being open to other's concurring influences. Within the fine line between implementing a structured plan and allowing various delegates to refine these cooperative goals, school leadership employed mutual effort (Kouzes and Posner, 2007).

Resulting survival anxiety was exemplified by the fear of losing personal and communal identities; i.e., a feeling to get through tasks based on their completion alone. The interim principal's challenge restored the cognitive elements of psychological safety within the building and district, while citing two contributions: team-building with faculty, and being an ethical role model (Cohen, 2010; Schein, 2010). During a time of an unpredictable school crisis, one cannot attempt the former without working

systematically toward the latter.

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## Appendix

### Informational letter sent to parents:

March 14, 2011

Dear Parents and Guardians:

It is with great sadness that we inform you of the death of a member of the school community, Principal Smith, on March 12, 2011.

A sudden loss like this can have an effect on students. For that reason, we hope that you will listen to your child(ren), as well as discuss with them their feelings and reactions to the tragedy. Sudden death is always painful to understand, and your child(ren) may experience signs of stress.

These include:

- sleeplessness, or over-sleeping
- changes in appetite and concentration
- isolation and withdrawal
- increased aggression
- regressive behavior (e.g., thumb sucking)

- separation anxiety
- fear of changes in daily routine
- use of alcohol and other drugs
- risk-taking behaviors

We are especially concerned about risk-taking behaviors and strongly recommend that you remove your child's access to medication, alcohol, drugs, and firearms.

Counselors will be available starting March 14<sup>th</sup> at the Middle School Guidance Department Conference Room (#120) to talk with students who are experiencing stress. If you have any concerns, please call Mrs. Smith, at (518) 555-5555.

If your child was close to the family of the principal, please call the above number for additional suggestions. All students in attendance of the funeral services, must have a written note. Please accompany your child to these services.

*There is an informational meeting for parents and guardians, Tuesday, March 15<sup>th</sup> at the Middle School Auditorium at 4:30 pm. The agenda will include the steps the school district is taking during this tragic times.*

On behalf of the Middle School, and the entire Northside District, we extend our sincere condolences to the family of Principal Smith on this sad occasion.

Sincerely,  
Interim Principal

(Adapted from: Kerr, M. M. (2009). *School Crisis Prevention and Intervention*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Dr. Gabrielle L. McBath earned her Ph.D. in Educational Leadership from Northcentral University, and has a research and publication background on the various topics of: Educational mandates, English & German language and literature, and volunteers' motivational theories in wartime. She received her Master's Degrees from LeMoyne College (Syracuse, NY) in Educational Leadership and the State University of New York College at Cortland in Secondary English. Her undergraduate work was completed at St. John Fisher College in English and German. Currently, she is a Manuscript Reviewer for the Journal of International Education Studies, Canada.*

